

Society & Culture Spotlight

PGR & ECR WRITING

COMPETITION



Abstract Booklet, July 2024

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The Society & Culture Spotlight invited Postgraduate Researchers and Early Career Researchers from across the University of Warwick to take part in this opportunity to shape the Spotlight's work.

We are delighted to present this collection of abstracts, which showcases the diverse and insightful contributions of our researchers.

We hope it inspires continued exploration and dialogue within our research community.

July 2024

Misinformation, Social Perceptions and Prevention in a Pandemic

Ankit Shankar

Imagine waking up to a world thrown into chaos by a new virus, COVID-66. Social media is your go-to for updates, but it's a storm of conflicting opinions about the vaccine. How do you decide what to believe and whether to get vaccinated?

In my study, I dove into this very scenario to see how social media misinformation impacts our decisions about vaccines. In a series of two experiments, people were given a choice scenario with a fictional virus, COVID-66. The first experiment showed that misinformation didn't just directly lower people's willingness to get vaccinated—it also changed how they thought others felt and acted. This shift in social norms played a major role in their decision-making process. In the second experiment, I tested different ways to correct this misinformation, Algorithmic corrections—those handy links to fact-checking sites and government sources—were the most successful in mitigating adverse effect of belief in misinformation.

Here's what research found: misinformation doesn't just affect intentions directly; it changes your perception of what others are doing and thinking. This shift in this perception of social norms impact people's own health decision-making. For instance, just changes in perception of whether others will get vaccinated explains nearly 40% of the total change in people's decision due to misinformation.

The research shows we need a double-edged sword in public health: one side to slice through misinformation and the other to shine a light on positive social norms. This dynamic duo can help reduce the negative effects of misinformation and encourage more people to get vaccinated. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for tackling vaccine hesitancy and protecting public health. By addressing both false info and social dynamics, we can better navigate the choppy waters of vaccine misinformation during a pandemic.

Viewing Responses to Trauma as Reasonable Reactions to Unreasonable Circumstances

Beth Cumber

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and trauma are linked to significant short and long term negative physical and mental health outcomes for both children and adults. Extensive research emphasises the need to prevent and address trauma across various services and societal levels. However, trauma approaches are often rooted in the medical model of pathologisation which can result in additional complexity and potential harm.

Trauma extends beyond psychiatric implications into political and social dimensions. Trauma describes human experiences and influences self-perception, with terms like “trauma survivor” reflecting this shift. Despite this broader understanding, the diagnosis and treatment of mental disorders remain medicalised, isolating trauma pathology within individuals. This approach overlooks trauma’s relational nature and broader social contexts, prioritising symptom reduction over a holistic understanding of individuals’ experiences. This can perpetuate stigma and shame associated with complex trauma and may cause iatrogenic harm.

In young people’s mental health services, increased demand and long waiting times exacerbate the crisis, leading to higher emergency referrals and hospital admissions. Inpatient care can be essential, however, safe avoidance of hospitalisation is preferable due to the potential harm from restrictive practices and reliance on psychotropic medication. Inpatient settings can involve complex power imbalances, acute distress and separation from family/social networks. A case vignette illustrates these points. Alex, a 15-year-old residing in foster care, was admitted to a mental health unit due to severe mental health concerns. The structured environment of the ward provided stability, but Alex’s self-harming behaviours intensified with positive reinforcement. Home leave, initially a motivator, also increased incidents of self-harm due to the tension between connection and instability. The ward’s predictability and consistent care offered Alex a sense of security, but restrictive practices used to manage distress could evoke memories of previous trauma.

Advocates for trauma informed care call for a shift from traditional biomedical models to strengths-based perspectives, recognising the adaptive strategies survivors develop. However, focussing on trauma without addressing its social and structural roots risk a reductionist view. Trauma discourse must incorporate a social perspective, acknowledging economic and gender-based causes of suffering. Effective responses require a structural critique of economic and political systems, moving away from pathologizing trauma toward empowering survivors and addressing broader social factors.

¡CANARIAS TIENE UN LÍMITE!

Chris Waite



It may look like paradise... The view to Teide from Barranco de la arena, near Puerto de la Cruz, Tenerife

On the 20 April 2024 the Canary Islands saw the largest protests against the growth of tourism there under the banner 'Canarias tiene un límite' – 'the Canaries have a limit' – which implies that the limits of the islands have been ignored and are being exceeded in some way. This got me thinking about the various meanings of 'limit' (capacity, boundary, definition) and why we might have ever thought that these islands in the African Atlantic were without limits. I also wondered how this might relate to the common conceptions of the islands as ideal for a holiday, often at a bargain price. During my own research on the translation of a writer, Agustín Espinosa (1897-1939), who was born on one of the islands (Tenerife), I have become interested in how the natural environment in which (and about which) he wrote might be reflected in his writing style. And given that translation involves shifts in both language and time, I wondered how the changes seen in the Canary Islands in the last 100 years might inform my translation. Without realising it I had become an interdisciplinary researcher; suddenly it was not just text that I was translating, but history, politics, geography, environment... the list is potentially without end.

It was Pliny the Elder who first specifically identified the Canary Islands as the Fortunatae Insulae – the Fortunate, or Blessed Islands, which all have 'quantities of fruits and every kind of bird in plenty'. The mythical and literary origins of the Canary Islands seem to resonate with the issue of their limits today: perhaps in our imagination they have become fantastic, beyond reality, beyond the difficulties of contemporary life. Homer tells us 'life there is the easiest', there are 'no heavy storms or rain'. The only limit, it appears, might be our imagination.

But of course, there are real limits. The eight islands – El Hierro, La Gomera, La Palma, Tenerife, Fuerteventura, Gran Canaria, La Graciosa, and Lanzarote – have a surface area of 7,557 km² and a total population of 2.17 million (2021 figures). Despite these real limits—eight small islands—we seem to enter an imaginary world when we realise that in 2023 13.9 million tourists visited the archipelago, an annual increase of 13.1%. And in the first three months of 2024 4.3 million tourists have already visited the Canaries, an increase of 14.3% on the same period in 2023. There is not just a high concentration of tourists in the Canaries; economic and social problems intensify here too: figures for wages, unemployment, poverty, and rental costs are some of the worst in Spain. No wonder there are protests. In what way could these islands be considered fortunate?

Colonialism and Consumption: Material Identities Through a Global Lens

Eloisa Ocando Thomas

Consumer society, consumerism, overconsumption. Even in the midst of climate crisis, why is consumption so hard to leave behind?

This piece argues that consumption is a key aspect of human life and as such, contemporary consumption dynamics affect global power relations that particularly touch colonial and post-colonial spaces. By using consumption as a window, I aim to examine past and contemporary colonialism and colonial relationships in a wide perspective.

This piece is broken up in 5 sections. The first one, "Things that make us" explores the links between consumption and identity, showing how food choices were used to characterize indigenous people in America as "savage" during the early conquest of the continent. The following section "Consumption and colonialism: global beginnings" showcases how consuming things has shaped history well before the advent of shopping malls and Amazon hauls. In "Material consequences of colonialism", I briefly outline how colonial hierarchies were shown through consumption patterns, particularly in Spanish America. Then, "Nationhood and consumption in postcolonial contexts" explores the use of consumption to create feelings of belonging, as well as some of the repercussions of colonialism on local consumption patterns. Finally, in "American goods made in China", I address some of the inequalities inherent to contemporary overconsumption and mass production. I end the piece with a brief reflection on getting out of the consumption cycle. While understanding the deep inequalities and exploitation of our current consumption practices, there are also ways forward.

What Should Feminists Do About Lactation?

Jenny Brown

A few years ago, an advert for a breast pump did the rounds on social media. Entitled “If Men Breastfed”, the two minute-long film imagines an alternative universe where women give birth to babies, but men breastfeed them. Within this altered division of labour, we follow a man, dressed in a business suit, being supported by male colleagues after the breastmilk that is leaking from his nipples becomes visible through his shirt during a work meeting. Met with sympathy, he is taken and given a tour of the in-office “Lactation Lounge”, which resembles a man cave or gentleman’s bar - decked out with leather Chesterfield sofas, and adorned with Madonna-like portraits of George Washington, Teddy Roosevelt, and Winston Churchill nursing their young - in which a number of male colleagues are relaxing and pumping breastmilk. In this masculine celebration of breastfeeding, “lactation steaks” are served; a bow-tied barman cheerfully polishes up empty bottles, flanges, and tubes; and colleagues compete with each other on a live-updated “lactation leaderboard” tracking fluid ounces expressed, and by proudly comparing notes on their various pumping tech, whether it be the sleek silver and white touch-screen “iPump”, or the manual bicep-curl gym-workout inspired “Nordic Vac”.

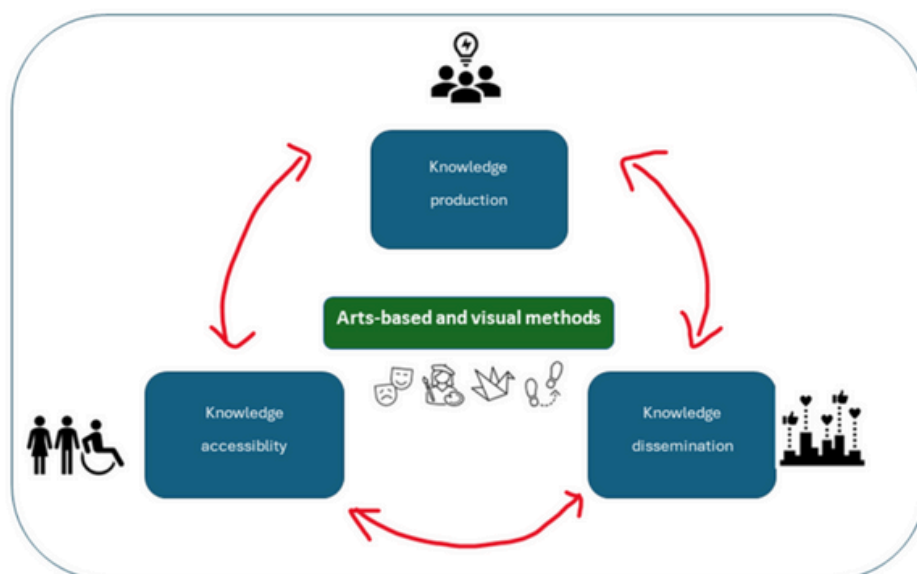
This alternative universe is then juxtaposed with a more accurate portrayal of the reality of breastfeeding – a woman pumping in a stationery cupboard, a process disturbed by an embarrassed male colleague who is on the search for printer toner, the location of which, judging by the woman’s response, she knows intimately given the amount of time she has already expended perusing the supplies. In a blog-post, the creators of the advert, Naya health, express their desire to playfully imagine that if men had to bear the costs of breastfeeding, and if male dominance in the workplace then included breastfeeding, what accommodations and perks would result, and to simultaneously highlight the inconvenience, the indignity, and the generally ignored workplace inequality that combining breastfeeding and work currently involves for women.

This kind of counterfactual imagining is useful in our moral reasoning, to imagine alternative possibilities, and to help us to articulate reasonable expectations of adjustments that could or perhaps even should be made to workplaces to include breastfeeding women. It highlights the way that breastfeeding, a practice that is gendered as female, has low visibility and low status, both culturally, and in medical research. It makes one wonder whether, if it was men that lactated, we would know more about human milk, and sooner, given the dearth of research into women’s health and the centring of the male subject as the norm in the biological sciences. Since human milk contains cancer killing cells (known as HAMLET – human alpha-lactalbumin made lethal to tumour cells²) the male Madonnas on the Lactation Lounge wall might as well have been superheroes with capes as well as world leaders. But it also prompts another question, perhaps one not intended to provoke: why can’t men breastfeed?, or to rephrase it more directly, can men breastfeed?

Addressing Knowledge Inequality: Visual and Arts-based Methods as a Possibility

Meifang Zhuo

To address the issue of knowledge inequalities, the vision of Society & Culture, collective efforts must be made to democratize knowledge. We academics, with both our hats as educators (spreading knowledge by teaching) and researchers (generating knowledge by researching), can play an essential role in closing the gap of knowledge inequalities. I argue that academics can employ visual and arts-based methods (VAbMs) to democratize knowledge in their teaching and researching, by removing the barriers to non-academic individuals' access to knowledge, involving research participants in knowledge production, and enhancing their participation in knowledge dissemination. In each of the three aspects: knowledge accessibility, knowledge production, and knowledge dissemination, I will first use a representative example of effective practice to explain the usefulness of VAbMs and then explore its implications for our teaching and research. By sharing this article as an entry for Society & Culture Spotlight PGR and ECR writing competition, I hope this proposal can get across to a wider community at Warwick and hopefully it will engender academics' interest in using VAbMs to work with our students, research participants, non-academic partners, and colleagues within and beyond our discipline, to play our due role in closing the gap of knowledge inequalities.



Daybreak

Naomi Williams

Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6w9eQ5wWITY>

The birds sing their song, heralding a new morning; daybreak's promise buries night's pain, offering gratitude for a new beginning. Footsteps stirring in the mind, awakening the age-old question: will today be a fresh start or a repeat of the past? It is a chance to rewrite history, to begin anew. Before the heaviness of the feet begin their journey of merging with the familiar floor beneath, a moment of profound yet fleeting contemplation sparks anticipation in the soul. There is a yearning for connection, a desire to delve beyond superficial conversations and touch something profound, authentic, and enduring. As this thought tugs at the spirit, pulling the body from its rest, a gentle sigh escapes, signalling the start of the day. Shadows dance through the streets, but connections remain elusive. Eyes flit from pillar to post, and footsteps sync with the road's rhythm. "Excuse me, sorry, excuse me, pardon me," becomes a mantra in the dance of the traffic and people. The rush hour cacophony of horns and hurried footsteps reflects the bustling society, where happiness often withers in the chaos. This daily hustle, a reflection of societal pressures, dictates the pace of life and moulds the collective mood. The cold edge of winter still bites, while spring hesitates to bloom fully. The transition of seasons mirrors the internal struggle for renewal, the clash between lingering gloom and emerging hope. Grasping at the transport handles, a new body joins the dance, moving along the river's rhythms. The freedom of movement and the company of the breeze whisper encouragement to the soul. The river, a timeless witness to countless dawns, carries with it the promise of change and continuity. In the delicate balance, the determinants of society, culture, and mental health intertwine. Society's rush and pressure shape the day's rhythm, influencing individual moods and interactions. The weight of societal expectations can be a heavy burden, yet it is also a motivator, pushing individuals to strive, achieve greater, connect, heal, and evolve. Cultural norms dictate the dance of apologies and excuses, reflecting collective behaviour and the unwritten rules of engagement, something that makes one ponder. These norms provide a framework within which people navigate their daily lives, offering comfort and constraint to the unwilling participant and laying helpless as the next victim of the harsh reality of the forecast of thunder when one has dared to be unapologetically authentic in whom they are purposed to be. Mental health, fragile yet resilient, navigates this intricate landscape, finding solace in moments of connection and nature's embrace. The ever-delicate mind battles with the world's noise, seeking pockets of peace amidst the chaos.

Seeing is Believing, Seeing is not Believing, and Seeing is Believing again

蘇宗鴻 Tsung-Hung (William) S

In the contemporary Eurasia, peace-making interconnectedness between 'antiwar sentiments in Ukraine' and 'antiwar sentiments in Gaza' is still under construction. Since both Ukraine War and Gaza War have profound impacts on the entire global society, this article argues the controversial cleavage between 'exclusive European affairs' and 'exclusive Asian affairs' in such a geographically connected Eurasia. In order to bridge cultural heritages between Europe and Asia, it makes efforts to combine the Zen Master's triple levels with Hegelian three-paragraph dialectics, presenting the correlations. In particular, three-level dialectical logic of mind mapping addresses each stage with the effect of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, respectively. Most importantly, I have provided conceptual visual aids as well as making examples of well-known incidents to assist the readers for a better understanding of the above ideas. Hopefully, it may bring new light on relevant studies for epochal oriental-occidental academic exchanges, especially on the feedback to the query 'how are society and culture understood and experienced in the contemporary world?' through my approach of dialectics-associated mindfulness.

Figure 1: Antiwar Demonstration Tents in the University of Warwick



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